



State Journal/Suzanne Feliciano

"This is easy. I wish I'd known this before," Jacqueline Johnson, right, said as she worked on math problems Wednesday with instructor Erin O'Donnell. Johnson is getting her GED at Thorn Hill Learning Center.

Coming out of darkness

Woman recovering from clinical depression hopes GED studies will open a new chapter in her life

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At 9 on a sunny, warm July morning, Jacqueline Johnson sat ready for the day's summer school lesson. The topic was ordering decimals, and various numbers were written on the board ready to be put in their place.

This scene could make any 12-year-old cringe. But Johnson wasn't dragged out of bed that morning by an overly cheerful parent. She is a 37-year-old

woman who finally appreciates the value of an education that she cut short years ago to take care of her grandmother.

The reality really hit her when her 14-year-old son Zach began struggling with his homework.

"I couldn't help, I didn't know what he needed to know," she said. "I decided to come back and get my GED, and then go to college."

Johnson said she is also painfully aware that in a few short years, her son will be grown. She said she wants a career, something

for herself, so she is not lost when Zach leaves. She started taking classes at Thorn Hill Learning Center a year ago, taking advantage of adult education classes offered there.

"For so many years all I lived for was my son," she said. "That was the only thing that kept me going. But now he is 14, he doesn't need mama as much and I want something for me."

She is still deciding which
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GED offers new beginning

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career will be her ultimate goal. Between nursing and a career working with computers, she is more excited about the technology program at Blue Grass Community College in Lexington, which she hopes to attend after she gets her GED.

But for now, she labors through Math II in a small green classroom. Erin O'Donnell, an adult education teacher, illustrates the lesson another student missed the previous day using different size orange blocks scattered across three tables arranged in a horseshoe around a large white dry-erase board. The visual image had helped Johnson understand which decimals were smaller, and which were larger.

She acknowledges that coming back to school was more difficult than she remembered, but finds Thorn Hill to be far better than any traditional school system. She credits the positive staff with getting her through the rough spots.

Johnson was diagnosed as clinically depressed in 1986, and also suffers from learning disabilities. She has relied on disability for years and does not work. But in the last four years she felt herself coming out of the paralyzing depression, and wanted something more in life, though at one point in her life she thought a better life wasn't possible. She remembers going to a clinic in 1992 and relating her dreams of getting her GED and a career during therapy. She said she was told she would only be setting herself up for disappointment.

"They told me I would never make that accomplishment," she said. "They tested me ... and I had always had a learning disability, always felt different. They made it worse."

Her experience at Thorn Hill couldn't be more different, she said.

"It's not like going to a public school here ... I can feel the love," she said. "They really care about me."

She had such a good experience she also brings her son in for tutoring to overcome his learning disability, ADHD. She said she wants him to feel the same about school as she does now.

"We have this law, No Child Left Behind, but there are kids left behind. My son is one of them," she said. "But I tell him don't use your disability as a crutch like I did for so many years."

She said she also helps to inspire younger students. Her teachers say she is a model student.

"She is a very dedicated person," said instructor Barry Burkett. "She is always on time ... always has a smile on her face. When she

had surgery she even requested homework so she wouldn't fall behind."

Johnson can't wait to graduate next May and move on to preparing for the ACT with Burkett. Though she remains looking towards the future, she doesn't

hesitate to divulge all she has learned through her past.

"I always tell young people if they have the chance, to stay in school," she said. "I see a lot of young people wasting time. If they come (to Thorn Hill), they will get the right perspective."